

VZCZCXRO9690

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RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHRS RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHIK #0016/01 0941337
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 041337Z APR 09
FM AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0432
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHIK/AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI 0475

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 THESSALONIKI 000016

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SMIG](#) [SNAR](#) [SOCI](#) [GR](#) [TU](#) [MK](#)
SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: NORTHERN NOTES - MARCH 2009

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Following is a summary of last month's major developments in
Northern Greece:

FINANCIAL CRISIS FORCING BUSINESSES TO REDUCE WORK HOURS

1. (U) On March 9, the President of the Exporters Association of Northern Greece Vassilis Thomaidis stated that local businesses have implemented reduced work hours in order to avoid substantial lay-offs. On March 17, Alumil S.A. President Giorgos Milonas announced that employees in his company (the largest in Northern Greece) agreed to work 20% fewer hours and receive 20% lower wages for the next six months. Media and union leaders strongly criticized the development.

INCIDENTS HIGHLIGHT POLICE TRAINING, RECRUITMENT PROBLEMS

2. (SBU) A number of recent arson attacks and other violent anarchist acts have drawn attention to reported police training deficiencies. For example, according to police contacts, there is no indoor police shooting range in Thessaloniki and as a result, officers are inadequately trained. Police practice shooting at an outdoor range at least once a year, but are discouraged from going due to the remote location and lack of bullets provided (officers who go frequently end up paying for the bullets they use). In another police-related development, Hellenic Police's new Rapid Reaction Force reportedly has problems attracting enough officers, despite an announced salary bonus for assuming a position with the new group. Local media claim that the new Force will effectively replace the relatively inactive "Z" Force.

MUSLIM MINORITY IN THRACE - PROBLEMS AND PROGRESS

3. (SBU) Minority organizations circulated a petition earlier this month, asking for the establishment of bilingual (Greek/Turkish) kindergartens in Thrace. Local Muslim MP Ahmet Hajiosman told press that Muslims were determined to take the matter to the ECHR, if they were turned down by GoG. The GoG has proposed instead "multicultural" kindergartens instead, in which instruction in Pomak and Romani languages could also be available, depending on the student needs. Also, local media claimed that 250 imams in Thrace have not been paid government stipends for over a year, due to a long-standing disagreement with GoG over their insurance. An MFA contact told post that the matter was resolved on March 1 and the imams received all their due salaries, after most of them had been upgraded to full civil servant status as part of the GoG's February 2007 minority rights initiative. Finally, a report in the local Greek-language press cited members of the minority as "very happy" with conditions in Thrace with minority education as the only issue with room for improvement. Members of the Turkophone Muslim minority, however, continue to complain openly about the GoG's refusal to recognize the existence of a "Turkish"

minority, and the inability of Muslims to choose their own muftis.

HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTS DRAW CRITICISM FROM LOCAL OFFICIALS/MEDIA

14. (SBU) Local opinion is mostly negative about U.S., UN and European Union reports on minority rights in Thrace. Media claim that the State Department Human Rights Report chapter on Greece, the report by EU Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg and the report by UN Independent Expert on Human Rights Gay McDougal are part of a coordinated effort to pressure Greece on minority rights, driven by the United States. Additionally, Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Anthimos stated after a televised Sunday sermon that the UN report on Greece could "cause many problems for Greece, if it succeeded in creating a Macedonian and a Turkish minority in the country." Finally, opposition MP Giorgos Lianis (elected in Florina, northwest Greece -- home of the Slavo-phone Greek population that claims to be members of a Macedonian minority) called the UN Report "a scheme for the documentation of a Macedonian minority in Greece."

MFA CONFIRMS POLICY ON NAME ISSUE; GREEKS CONTINUE TO SHOP IN MACEDONIA

15. (SBU) MFA Dora Bakoyanni reiterated the Greek position on the name dispute with Macedonia, i.e. a name with a geographical determinant that will be used in all circumstances, during a visit to Pella, northern Greece on March 15. Meanwhile, northern Greeks reacted negatively to the news that the European Parliament ratified with a large majority (478 for to 98 against, 42 abstaining) a report on Macedonia, that Greeks perceived as "reducing" the name issue to a bilateral dispute. Also, local press pointed out that despite the dispute between the two countries, hundreds of Greeks continue to visit Macedonia for inexpensive goods and services, spending around 300m a year in the neighboring country. Lastly, the defrocked Macedonian-speaking priest Nikodimos Tsarknias was handed a

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suspended sentence of six months in prison for assaulting a minor who was singing that "Macedonia was Greek" [Note: After being defrocked for alleged homosexuality in 1993, Tsarknias set up his own "Church of Macedonia of the Aegean." End Note]

VIOLENT INCIDENTS: ANARCHISTS BECOMING BOLDER?

16. (SBU) A number of fire-bombings and other violent incidents, including some committed downtown in broad daylight, raised concerns that anarchist violence may be entering a new phase. The most spectacular attack occurred in the early evening of March 30, when the offices of six Greek parliamentarians of different political parties were simultaneously firebombed. All suffered light or moderate damage. A group calling itself the "Deconstruction Council of Order" claimed responsibility. On March 29 at 2:30 in the afternoon, about 30 anarchists attacked with hammers the front windows of two shops in downtown Thessaloniki, while the shops were open for business and full of customers. The organizations "Path to Darkness" and "Arsonists' Co-operation of the Millennium" claimed responsibility. On March 28, shortly after midnight, unknown individuals smashed the front window of a bank and set fire to its interior, causing extensive damage. At 02:30am, a hand grenade damaged a National Bank ATM. On March 22, during a demonstration organized by right-wing party LAOS, an American journalist was attacked and lightly injured while trying to take photographs of the event. On March 7 at midnight, unknown individuals threw Molotov cocktails into the parking space of a public utility, completely incinerating four official vehicles. The organization "Nikola Tesla" claimed responsibility. On March 5, at around 19:30, 300 marching members of the "Anti-racist Initiative of Thessaloniki" hurled stones, paint and Molotov cocktails at shop windows in the city center. Riot police dispersed the crowd. Police made no arrests in connection with any of the incidents.

COUNTERFEIT ARRESTS AND CONFISCATIONS ON RISE

17. (U) On March 4, northern Greek police in arrested a 19-year old foreign national for possessing 142 counterfeit CDs and 33 DVDs. Police confiscated the products and fined the culprit 2,840. In another incident on March 9, police arrested a 20-year old asylum seeker from Pakistan for possessing 96 counterfeit CDs which were also confiscated. Local media reported this month a statement by the Director General of Customs Nikos Vernardakis, according to which, confiscations of counterfeit products have increased 1000% in the last five years nationwide. Also, police, the Coast Guard and the Ministry of Finance reported to the media the confiscation of a total of 216, 445,228 smuggled cigarettes for 2008, up from 148,636,895 the previous year.

SMUGGLERS - ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARRESTS

18. (U) On March 4, police on the Greek-Turkish border arrested two foreign nationals for smuggling 11 illegal immigrants into the country in a plastic boat. Police also arrested the illegal immigrants and confiscated the boat. On March 13, police in Thrace, northern Greece arrested three Turkish nationals and a French national suspected of smuggling them into the country. On March 17, police in Thrace arrested two Bulgarians suspected of alien smuggling and the two Syrians they were attempting to smuggle into Greece.

NARCOTICS ARRESTS AND SEIZURES: 11 KG HEROIN, 171 KG HASHISH

19. (U) On March 10, narcotics squad officers arrested an Albanian national and a Greek national and confiscated 11 kilos and 128 grams of heroin in the former's car. On March 4, police arrested an Albanian national in northwest Greece after they found and confiscated 68 kilos and 650 grams of hashish in his car. On the same date, police arrested four men in Thessaloniki for possession of 53 kilos of hashish. Police confiscated the drugs and 14,695 in cash. On March 19, in two separate incidents in NW Greece, police confiscated a total of 50 kilos of hashish, arrested one individual and are looking for another two.
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